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C-17 makes first polar airdrop

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MCCHORD AIR FORCE BASE, Wash. -- Airmen here load pallets of fuel onto a C-17 Globemaster III to support the C-17 Globemaster III's first polar airdrop. About 10,000 gallons of fuel were dropped to help National Science Foundation scientists near the North Pole. (U.S. Air Force photo by Kevin J. Tosh Jr.)

4/13/2005 - **MCCHORD AIR FORCE BASE, Wash. (AFPN)** -- Aircrews from here airdropped life-sustaining cargo to National Science Foundation scientists at the North Pole in the C-17 Globemaster III's first polar airdrop April 12.

The last polar airdrop was flown in 2001 by the now retired C-141 Starlifter. This time, two jets made the 12-hour, nonstop flight to airdrop about 10,000 gallons of fuel to scientists on the ice.

The scientists are on a six-week mission to collect data on the effects of global climate change, said Tom Quinn, an international logistics manager working with the foundation. A network of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration buoys run across the Nares Straight between Canada and Greenland to measure water temperature, salinity and the speed and direction of Arctic Ocean currents, he said. The fuel will power generators, drilling equipment and a helicopter used to reach the buoys.

The buoys, which must have their data collected manually, have been gathering information for two years. Scientists only have a small window of time to collect the data, Mr. Quinn said.

The warmer spring Arctic temperatures allow people to work in the extreme climate zone, he said. At the same time, the weather is not warm enough to melt the polar ice sheet that the helicopter needs to use as a landing platform when it visits each buoy.

Without the fuel delivered by the C-17s, the mission would be dead on the ice, Mr. Quinn said.

“The C-17 seemed like the perfect aircraft for this mission,” he said. “It’s a good thing for McChord because it’s never been done before, and it’s big for us because we’re dealing with very challenging logistics.”

The logistics were difficult from here too, said Maj. Travis England, mission director from the 8th Airlift Squadron here.

“Planning began three months ago,” he said. “There were issues involving navigation at such extreme latitudes, which makes this flight abnormal for us.”

Abnormalities include some of the aircraft’s instruments acting oddly. As the aircraft flies near magnetic north, the compass needle may actually point in the wrong direction, leading them off the proper flight path.

The flight crews linked two flight simulators together and flew the mission so they could practice, Major England said.

The mission required two C-17s to descend over the frozen waterway to an altitude of about 1,000 feet, he said. The pilots visually identified the drop zone, which was a small island marked with the letter C.

The C-17 crews then let gravity pull the bundles out of the plane which engaged the parachute on each fuel pallet. After the initial drop, the planes made a second pass over the drop zone. The loadmasters then unhooked the deployment bags from the static lines, stuffed them into containers and dropped them as well. Scientists then repacked the parachutes into the deployment bags.

The aircrews that flew the mission consisted of active-duty and Reserve Airmen from the 62nd and 446th Airlift Wings here.